DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 597 CE 069 894

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TITLE	"Watching a Light Go on": Exploring the Use of Authentic Literature with Adult Learners. Teacher to Teacher.
INSTITUTION	Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Sep 95
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Reading Programs; *Childrens Literature; *Literacy Education; Reading Instruction; *Reading Material Selection; Supplementary Reading Materials

ABSTRACT

A team of professional adult literacy educators identified approximately 100 titles of picture books and young adult books appropriate for the adult learner. A collection of their ideas, titled Recommended Trade Books for Adult Literacy Programs: Annotated Bibliography with Teaching Suggestions, contained information on 93 titles, including lesson plans for some books and teaching suggestions for all of them. Three teachers in greatly different classes and programs piloted the materials. Using picture books and young adult literature in the adult literacy classrooms not only fostered critical thinking skills but also a love for reading. Reading authentic literature connected adult learners with others' feelings and experiences while broadening their view of the world; it sparked an interest that workbooks and basal readers could not do. Suggestions for teachers from the piloting teachers include: allow sufficient time; provide each student with his or her own copy of the book; keep a journal; in a one-on-one situation include the students in the book selection process; include art or other activities; and encourage the students to talk to family and friends about his or her reading. Contains five references. (YLB)

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Ohio Literacy Resource Center

039-0300-0011
September 1995

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Teacher To Teacher

ED 386 597

"Watching a Light Go On": Exploring the Use of Authentic Literature with Adult Learners

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Sarah Nixon-Ponder
with
Minnie Marshall, Ronetta Rafeld, and Laura Maus

From Dayton to Cleveland, adult literacy teachers are excited and amazed with the changes they are witnessing. Students are coming to class more regularly. Some students are going to the library on their own time to locate more materials on specific topics. They are actively discussing plots and characters and relating these to their own personal lives. They are discussing books with people outside of class, and they are becoming leaders among their peers.

What is happening here? What are these teachers doing to get their students so involved? The answer is short and simple: Their students are reading authentic books. Yes, books--not workbooks, not parts of books, but whole books.

Many adult literacy teachers believe that books written on a level easy enough for their students to read won't be exciting or appropriate for them. But there are plenty of books with simple text structures but interesting and thought-provoking plots and characters. They are free and readily accessible because they are located at public libraries around Ohio. Finding books that are appropriate and stimulating for adults is the key.

Background

For more than a year, a team of professional adult literacy educators has been gathering at the Ohio Literacy Resource Center at Kent State University every couple of months. Our mission is to locate, read, discuss, and debate the appropriateness of picture books and young adult books for the adult learner. Taking into consideration the pictures as well as the size and print of the books, we scrutinize the plot to decide whether or not it is told from too young of a perspective. We check for childish vocabulary and characters and also look for mature themes that tie in with other books and themes that are relevant to the adult learners' lives and experiences.

The team has read over 200 titles and from these has selected approximately 100 which we believe are the best of the best. We developed

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lesson plans for some books and teaching suggestions for all of them. A collection of our ideas, entitled *Recommended Trade Books for Adult Literacy Programs: Annotated Bibliography with Teaching Suggestions*, contains information on 93 titles. All adult literacy program directors have a copy of this collection; it is also available in 250 Ohio public libraries.

Our next step was to get these teaching suggestions, lesson plans, and books out into the hands of teachers to see what would happen when adult learners read these books. Three teachers in classes and programs that differ greatly from one another agreed to pilot our materials. A teacher in an Even Start program in inner-city Cleveland decided to take a stack of books and give them a try. An ABE instructor in a semi-suburban program incorporated two young adult books into her work with a small group of five students. A tutor working one-on-one with a student worked for several weeks with one of the books. Each teacher observed and experienced something different, but all were in full agreement that the changes they witnessed in their students were remarkable. Here are their stories.

Minnie

"I never thought it would have this kind of impact on our students. It was an awakening that there is so much to learn, to explore that was of interest to them."

Minnie Marshall's approach to using picture books and young adult books with her Even Start mothers was quite different from the other two teachers. She did not follow any set lesson plans or teaching suggestions. Instead, she came to class loaded up with books that she thought would fit into the theme of Black History month. Minnie spread the books out on a table and began to talk about some of them, highlighting the ones she liked the best. *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston* was one that Minnie especially enjoyed. One student took the book home with her and read it cover to cover. She then called a friend from the program and told her about the book, saying that it was the first book she had ever read for enjoyment. She passed this book on to another classmate who took the book home, read it, gave it to her teenage daughter who also read it and wrote a report for school on it. Next, it landed in the hands of Mrs. Harris. Mrs. Harris not only read *Sorrow's Kitchen*, she went to the library and checked out other books written by and about Zora Neale Hurston.

With more information on Hurston, Mrs. Harris set out to learn as much as she could about this woman who was "ahead of her time." She read books and articles about Hurston as well as some of Hurston's own works. Mrs. Harris compiled this information and wrote an extensive report on Hurston, which she read and distributed to her classmates.

Mrs. Harris's research set others into action. A friend of hers decided she wanted to learn more about Phyllis Wheatley, so the two of them went to the library to find books, articles, and information about Wheatley. She, too, wrote a report on the African-American woman of her choice. And just as important to note, this was the first time Mrs. Harris's friend Celestine had gotten a library card! Minnie reported that several women from her class went to the library with Mrs. Harris, where they obtained library cards as well as books and articles to learn about topics they had chosen.

Minnie described the change that came over Mrs. Harris as quite remarkable. She was rather quiet and non-involved before discovering Hurston, but Mrs. Harris grew into a natural leader, sharing her information and insights with the other women, urging them to read more, write more, and explore further. She was a great role model for the class; others went out and

followed her example. She became independent and didn't wait to be pushed into doing other projects by a teacher. She took the initiative and did them on her own. Mrs. Harris also got her family more involved in reading as well. Minnie stated that Mrs. Harris closely identified with Zora Neale Hurston's philosophy--that we have a special obligation and commitment to go one step further to help, whether it be with kids, family, or the community. "She put herself into Zora's shoes," Minnie stated.

Minnie's insight into her students was remarkable as well. "All students make these changes on their own time; at different points in their lives they are ready to change at different times." By knowing her students well and having the trust of her students, too, Minnie was able to help foster Mrs. Harris's desire to read, absorb, learn more, and lead others. Minnie believes that "you motivate when you're not even aware you're doing it."

Minnie has lots of advice for other teachers who want to use this as a teaching strategy:

- "Get to know your students. It is very important to build trust with them because then you can try different things with them. They'll trust you and what you're doing. You need their trust in order for them to risk doing something different."
- "They need to feel the success with doing things, and it takes time. If it doesn't work the first time, and you keep trying it, you might need to back off and work on that trust issue."
- "This is a process that takes time, patience, and lots of work. It's harder to think of some of these things, but with this new approach you are able to individualize. Everyone's needs from the literacy point of view are different, and we need to learn strategies to help our student's different needs. If you seriously want to help your students, you've got to try other approaches. For my students, this was an awakening, and books were the key."

Ronetta

Ronetta Rafeld's class of three men and two women read two young adult books, *Baby* and *Journey*, both by Patricia MacLachlan. This was the first time these students had worked in a small group situation; previously, all had been working one-on-one with a tutor. Several of the students expressed concern about working in a small group. Mostly they were embarrassed about speaking and reading in front of others; they thought they would appear foolish to the others in the group. Ronetta stated that as the group became more familiar with each other, these anxieties ceased.

Ronetta introduced *Baby* by talking about the author, Patricia MacLachlan. She discussed the cover of the book, the storyline, and the characters. She tried to anticipate the students' anxieties about reading a book together in class. Ronetta read the first chapter to them while they followed along in their own books. Students liked the book from the very beginning; they were positive about the content and enjoyed the story.

After two class periods of 30 minutes, Ronetta realized that they needed more time in order to do everything they wanted to do with the book. So she asked the students if they would want to extend the class to 45 minutes; all readily agreed!

At the end of each class period, Ronetta asked for volunteers to read passages aloud for the next class. This gave students time to practice what they were going to read to the group; it also gave them a sense of ownership in the group because they were able to choose what they wanted to read as well as how much they were going to read aloud. About halfway

through the book, everyone in class was volunteering to read. They no longer wanted Ronetta to read to them; they wanted to read to each other. Their fear and anxiety of reading and speaking in front of others in a group was gone, replaced with a sincere comfort they felt with each other and their literacy levels.

Ronetta also asked her students to pair up for critical thinking and writing activities. She gave the students a list of statements about the characters and plot, asked them to decide if they agreed or disagreed with each, and requested that they write the reasons for their decisions. They had to come to consensus, which sometimes involved persuading a partner to change his/her mind. Ronetta stated that the students had a difficult time "getting the hang of working with a partner and exploring their ideas. It's a different way of thinking, but even the actual writing in front of the other person was tough."

After several chapters into *Baby*, one student asked: "Are we working on comprehension here?" Ronetta turned the question into a discussion and let the students decide for themselves. They all bounced ideas off of each other and concluded that ***yes***, they *were* working on comprehension because they were discussing ideas in the book as well as their feelings about *Baby*. They were able to articulate what comprehension meant to them and share this understanding with each other.

Ronetta saw many positive outcomes of reading books with a small group:

- a sense of community and friendship developed as working in a small group became easier;
- the comfort students felt with each other enabled them to read, discuss, share, and support each other;
- the joy of reading that they all experienced;
- four out of the five in the group began reading books and magazines on their own time.

For Ronetta, this approach to teaching reading was most rewarding. When the class finished *Baby*, they immediately wanted to start reading another book--especially a book by the same author. She observed the students' confidence growing as they became risk-takers in their reading, writing, and sharing of ideas with others. Most of these adults had neither finished a book before nor really enjoyed reading until this class. Ronetta watched as their interest in each of the books grew; she compared it to "watching a light go on" as the students' excitement and enjoyment in the books sprouted. "It's a very different experience for them," Ronetta commented. At the end of the semester, Ronetta's students thanked her for doing this project with them, and they expressed their interest in doing it again. What a confirmation of just how much adult learners enjoy reading whole books!

Ronetta offers this advice to teachers who want to try this approach in their classrooms:

- "The time factor is very important. You need at least 45 minutes with the class to do this, but one hour would really be the best. You need time to discuss what has been read and to do the activities. You have to allow enough time for discussion."
- "If you're concerned about the students' {discomfort}, allow the students to choose passages to read so they can practice on their own. They will all do this--at least at first."
- "Make sure each student has his or her own copy of the book."
- "Keep a journal. It's helpful to jot down notes about how it's going, whether it went really well or bombed, and to look at the next day's lesson to make changes.

Journals are also good to help you reflect on what you would do differently. You also use a journal to record the students' progress and comments. It's also a written testimony of evidence to your supervisor of what's important and what's going on."

Laura

Laura Maus works one-on-one with a woman in her late thirties for one hour a week. Her student Kathy also meets with another tutor for two hours a week, working primarily in Laubach's *Challenger* series. Laura, like Ronetta, followed lesson plans for *Baby* but implemented some of her own teaching strategies. Laura began by reading two chapters to her student.

Laura stated that it's difficult to describe just how much her student enjoyed reading this book. Kathy continually kept her family and friends updated on the plot and events in the book. "Reading the book was so exciting for her that she couldn't help talking about it! This gave her a good chance to talk with others about her reading, since usually it's just she and I and her other tutor talking about her reading."

After reading *Baby*, Kathy told Laura that she wanted to change the curriculum in her tutoring sessions. She wanted to set aside the basal reader, focus strictly on reading novels, write about them, draw character sketches, and do activities similar to what she and Laura had done with *Baby*. She told Laura that she knew she hadn't been "particularly happy" with her previous curriculum, but she didn't know that "reading lessons could be like this." Reading this book gave her a strong enthusiasm for reading--something that she had never before experienced. They are planning to read *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, also by Patricia MacLachlan, next.

Laura has some advice for teachers who work one-on-one with students:

- "In a one-on-one situation, it's a good idea to pick the books with your student so the student really wants to read that book. It helped immensely that Kathy really liked the book *Baby*, and that made her extremely motivated to read it."
- "The tutor should do the same assignment that the student is doing. When you're reading literature, you're often asking the student to think about and share past experiences. So if the tutor is doing the same assignments as the student and sharing her views with the student, it will enhance the trust and strengthen the bond between the tutor and student."
- "To ensure that you continue to use literature in your lessons, you can go to the library together and create a list of books that your student wants to read. This way there will always be a list of books on hand that your student wants to read. You can also expand on this by having the student pick a topic she is really interested in and use the computer at the library to find books on that topic as well as other books by authors the student has read and liked."
- "There are other activities besides reading and writing that can be pulled into an assignment, like drawing characters and scenes from the books. This will encourage students to use other strengths they have."
- "In a one-on-one situation, encourage the student to talk to family and friends about what she is reading. This will help her to think about the book in different ways, and she will have to be more descriptive in how she describes it to someone else who hasn't read the book."

Conclusion

Using picture books and young adult literature in the adult literacy classroom not only fosters critical-thinking skills but also a love for reading. Too many adult literacy students have experienced "reading" as isolated skills in workbooks--an act that is unrelated to their lives and experiences. But reading authentic literature like adult fiction and nonfiction, young adult literature, and picture books *is* a meaningful activity for adult learners; it connects adult learners with others' feelings and experiences while broadening their view of the world.

Reading authentic literature sparks an interest that workbooks and basals cannot. The success that Minnie's, Ronetta's, and Laura's students have experienced is a direct result of reading books that intrigued, enlivened, and motivated them to want to read more and explore the world of print. To quote Minnie, the experience of reading authentic literature "was an awakening, and books were the key."

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